



FOR THE
OF THE



\$3 postage paid from

Microcosm Publishing
PO Box 14332
Portland, OR 97293

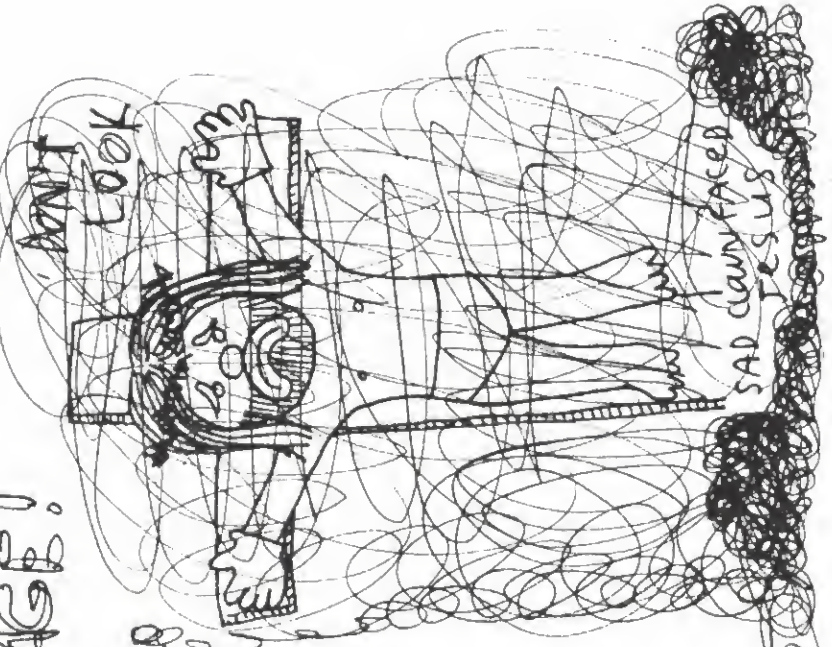
www.microcosmpublishing.com

SOLIDARITY CENTER
1119 MASSACHUSETTS
LAWRENCE, KS 66044
785-865-1374

BONUS FUN PAGE!

LETTER TO THE EDITOR:

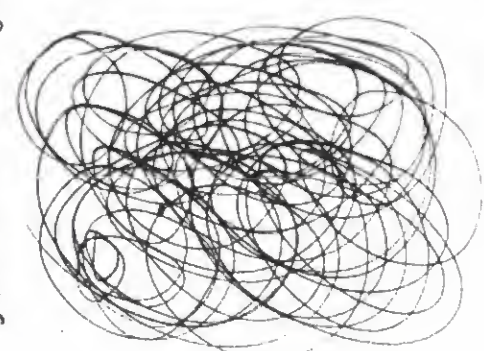
Man!
I totally dropped
by to read "What's
up?" and it's all
like nobodies home
and I'm all like,
"Shit."



the PINK GIRILLA suit
wore the little CANNBIKE
I rode (which the kids had
already dubbed
The
"Monkey
BIKE".)
It was a
success, I got
student work
that you guys
saw in the
suit was like
a big
like



at
school:



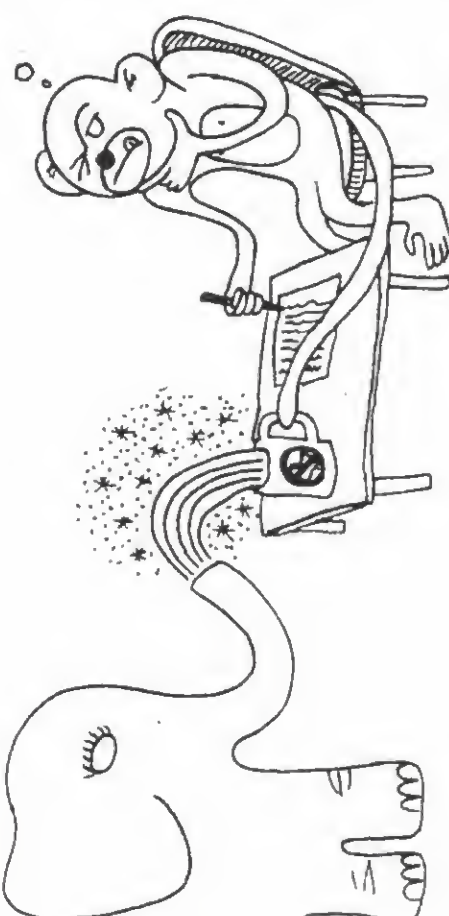
I HATE THIS PART OF TEXAS SPECIAL DISASTER COVER ISSUE

IT'S BEEN A WHILE, I KNOW.
THANKS FOR COMING; IT'S
GOOD TO BE HERE. THERE IS
MUCH TO TELL, BUT THAT WILL
HAVE TO COME LATER. GIVE IT
TIME, LET THINGS LEVEL OFF.
ANOTHER COUPLE OF YEARS, PERHAPS?

THIS IS NOT A EULOGY.
THIS WAS ALL WRITTEN OVER THE LAST
COUPLE OF YEARS, AND IT WAS ALMOST
FINISHED IN LATE AUGUST. IT WAS IN
THE SMALL BACKPACK OF THINGS WITH WHICH
I EVACUATED THE CITY, JUST BEFORE THE
HURRICANE. I'VE JUST NOW PUT ON
THE FINISHING TOUCHES.
MIRACULOUSLY, THE SILKSCREENED
COVERS SURVIVED BEING SUBMERGED IN THE
FLOODWATERS AND ESCAPED THE MOLD.
A SALVAGED GEM AMIDST A SCENE OF
INUNDATED WRACKAGE.

SIMILARLY, THE
CATS THAT LIVE UNDER
OUR HOUSE SURVIVED
SIX FEET OF WATER AND
WEEKS WITH NO ONE GIVING
THEM FOOD. SO HERE'S
TO THIRTH, BALZAC,
FRIDA and LITTLEHEAD,
AMONG OTHERS.
HERE'S TO SORROW, LOSS,
AND ABIDING GRIEF.
HERE'S TO FIERCE JOY,
CELEBRATION OF OUR
RESILIENCE.
HERE'S TO YOU, HERE'S
TO ME
THANKS FOR
READING.
JOHN GERKEN
JANUARY 2006

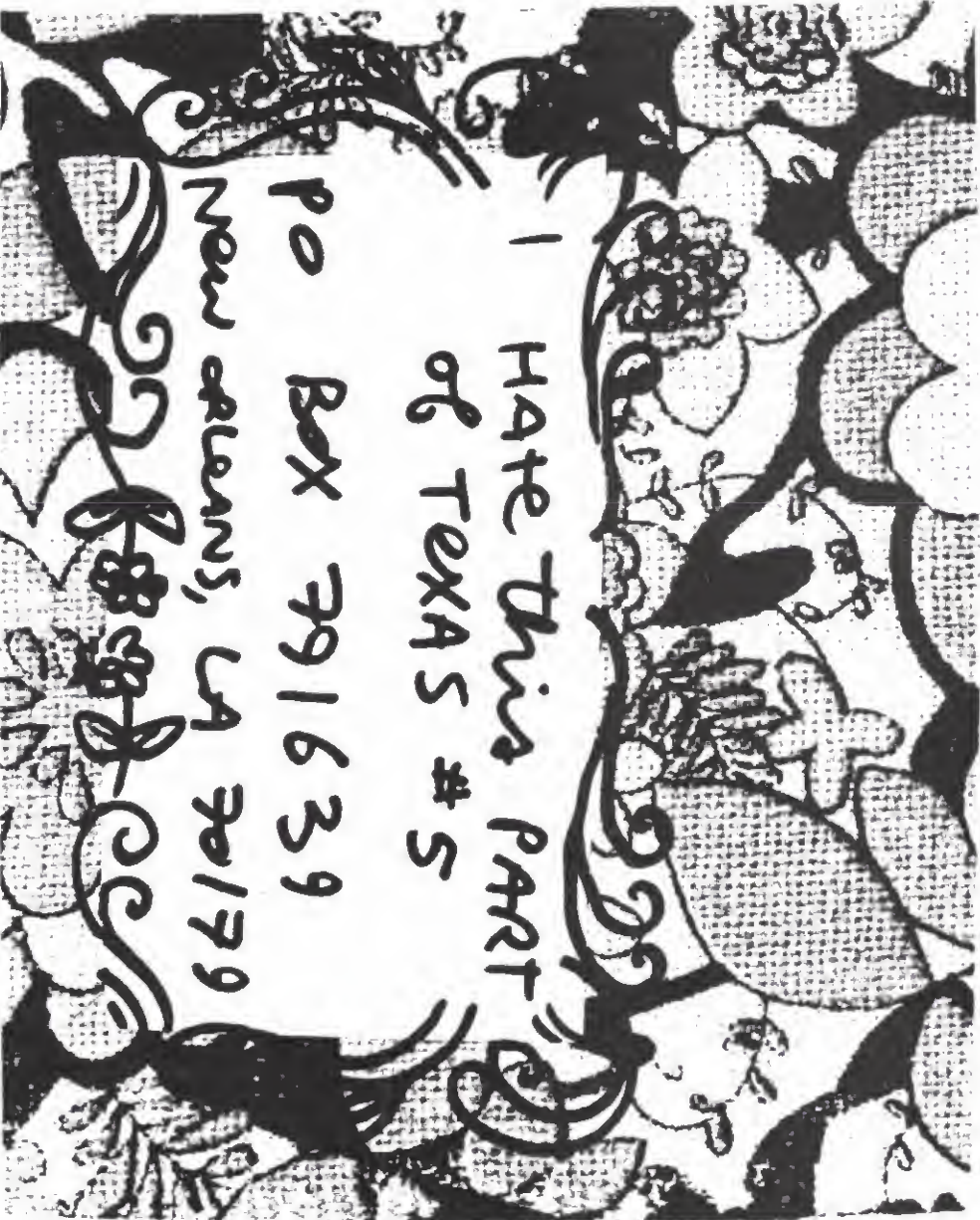
Hey, my PO BOX IS
ACTUALLY RECEIVING MAIL!
WRITE TO ME.



I was about to ride my bike across St. Claude, a few blocks away from Plan B, the New Orleans Community Bike Project. A boy rode up to me on his bike and yelled "I need a wheel!" I told him, yeah, come get one. "I need one now, you got one?" No, I said, not with me, but we'll be open in a little while. Come get one then. He looked confused. "Where?"

I've been at Plan B for a while now, so it's not uncommon for people in the neighborhood to recognize me, or to stop me and ask me about bikes. I assumed this boy had been asking because of that. I explained to him where it was, when we would be open, and that he could come get a wheel then.

There was a slight pause, and as I got back on my bike, he looked up at me. "Hey," he said, "I saw you uptown and you were dressed like a lady."



I HATE this PART
of TEXAS #5

PO Box 791639

New Orleans, LA 70179

True
Story



WHAT you say to a cop
when you have a Roman
candle up your ASS
on Canal Street
in New Orleans

SO MUCH love to all the people that make up
PLAN B, NAME MIASTO, UNCENSORED DRAG NATION,
PANORAMA JAZZ BAND and STEPPERS, MANGRAIP,
and the HOT TODDIES. And all DOMINOS players.
Thanks to editors and proofreaders,
especially AMMI.

and THANKS to MICROCOSM for printing
and righteous distro.

Hope does a time called
KEEP LOVING KEEP FIGHTING.
Shelley does CHAINBREAKER.
Both can be contacted through
me for the time being.
TRAVIS writes AMERICA?
ALLY GREEN makes all kinds
of beautiful things in PITTSBURGH.

You really should read
EMERGENCY #5
Try writing to AMMI at
PO Box 72023, N.O. LA 70172
or check MICROCOSM

also, don't forget "ONE SHOE IN THE ROAD"
a one-hour radio show of interviews
with bicyclists who have been struck
by cars. email DONE16@gmail.com

also, the NEIGHBORHOOD
STORY PROJECT
is one of the very best
things. Five different
books, written by
New Orleans high school
students about their
neighborhoods. I really
can't recommend this
highly enough.
WWW.NEIGHBORHOODSTORYPROJECT.COM

Sometime soon you will
be able to get TEXAS #1-4 in
one big issue.

NOTES:

EXORDIA means "BEGINNINGS"

"a great concourse of phantasmagoric shadow"
from J.C. ROLY'S

"all through town tonight are friends lie broken"
lifted almost verbatim from CORNAC MERTHY,
in SUTREE. "death hilarious" is him, also.

THE BARRY HANNAH article is in Oxford American,
A think Sept. 1995.

NAVE MIASO ROOFTOP drawing by LIBERTY EGGINK.

The covers were silkscreened at AIR in PITTSBURGH
under the tutelage of MARY MCK and with the
whiskey-bribed help of SHUN NUTMEG.

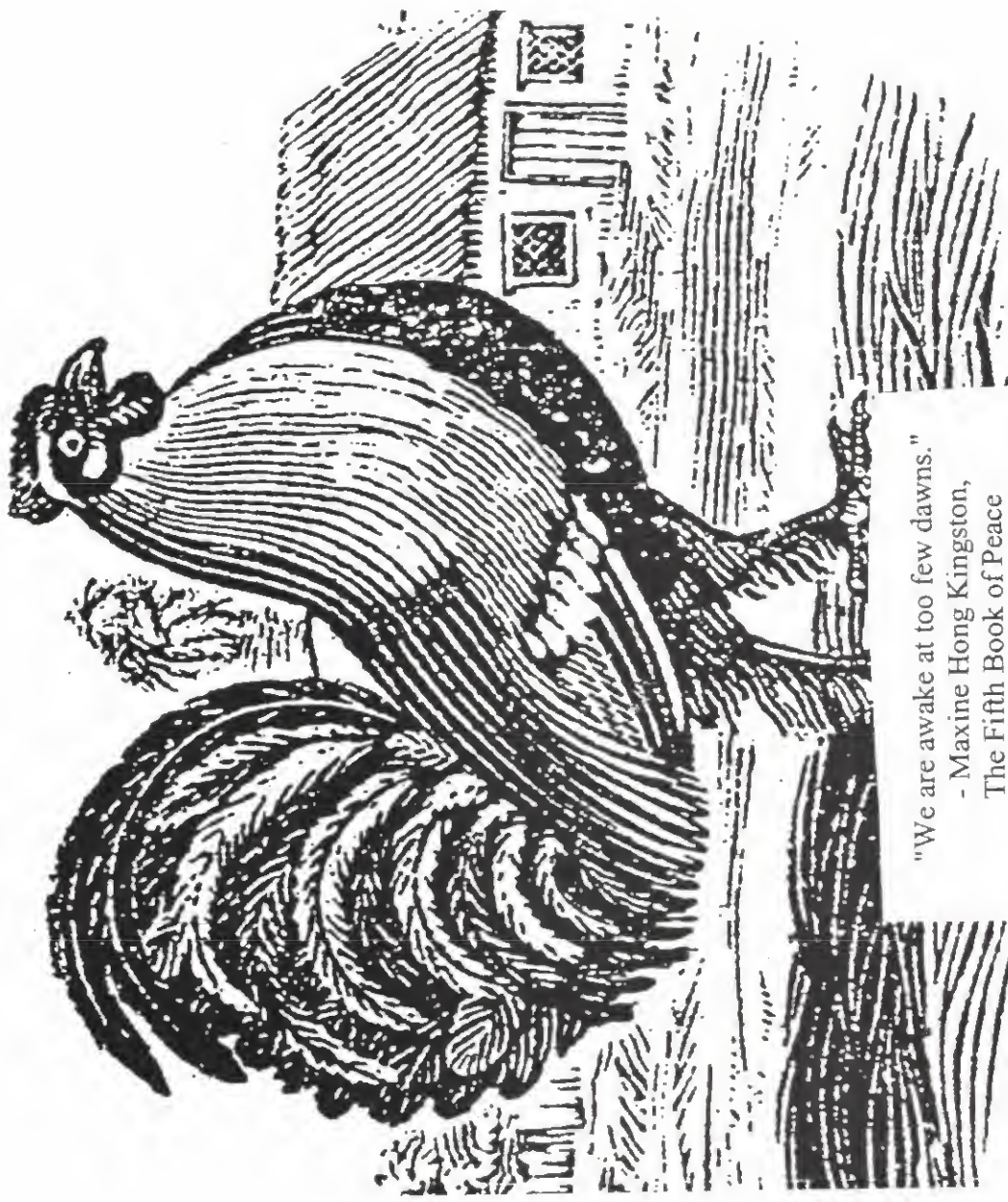
The creature on the back is by BENSHAHN.
the flowers are mine.

DEFINITION OF TERMS:

DIY refers to a way of going about things
(oo it yourself) so as to exert the most control
over your own life as possible, based on principles
of learning, sharing, cooperation.

By GENDER TERRORISM I mean the way our
culture enforces gender norms, from
patriarchal oppression to homophobia to
ignorance of transgender issues to the
ridicule of sissies and tomboys on the schoolyard.
We are given such limited options and all
manner of psychosocial coercion is used to
keep us limited. Not to mention physical violence.

A secondline is a NEW ORLEANS street parade. Not to
be confused with jazz funerals, a secondline is
just about any other time a brass band marches,
often with a social AIDS RESISTANCE club, and people
dance along in the streets, stopping at bars and
clubs to eat, drink, and socialize.



"We are awake at too few dawns."

- Maxine Hong Kingston,
The Fifth Book of Peace

Things cast a light of their own just before daybreak and it's an earthly
luminescence. Not the restive glow at dusk, trees and buildings having absorbed the
sun all day, but a glow of emergence. A soft light waiting to be matched and then
quickly and completely outshone by the sun. The veil of night swept away; a curtain
thrown back to reveal the fantastic doings of the world. A rock upturned and us like
beetles scurrying beneath it.

But just before that, the world is still. A murmur of expectancy, an anxious
waiting for the sky to split wide open. And every morning, with every single new
day, that anxiousness is met and answered. A trumpeting renewal of faith. A gift to
those waiting. The gentle egg of dawn cracks, and a flaming chicken heaves itself
into the sky to flap and squawk it's way across the heavens to the other end of the
day.



the beginning of a trip, where land and road
start singin to you in a way that it's too timid to
attempt in day to day life.

in beginnings i find an energy that is impossible to
replicate. The sprout of a seed, the first line of
a book or poem that a friend suggested 3 yrs. ago but
you are just now reading, the beginning of a
night when you have plans with a new friend or a crush.

LITTLE ENGINES OF MY DAY, TURN ON!!



---fictioned beginnings---

Endings, admittedly, are the more glamorous. The drunken shouting matches. Spectacular, winter evictions. When the engine caught fire & we couldn't stop laughing. Even the last show (that no one knew was the last show until the fight started)... The train heaves on from the station whether we cry, wave or aim a solid, silent 'fuck you'. Endings. Typical audiences have an insatiable desire for them.

But beginnings? That part gets abridged in the bios & film versions. Charlie Parker wasn't born a great horn player. Just ask the drummer who whacked him with a cymbal for playing so terribly & prematurely. The solitary practice scenes maybe aren't as visually compelling, but I still prefer the humbler beginnings to the self-destructive finish. Again, not the indulgent, later concept albums, but the overeager demo.

Beginnings are like the first cool night at the end of summer. Seasons aren't a surprise, but would you deny their succour after so many furtive nights? Such evidence is physical & constant: the gravity of leaves, our skin underneath layers of cotton & wool. But how many rebirth cycles do we get? There's grey in my beard now, a stiffness in my joints some cold mornings.

How did it begin? Maybe when I walked away from the show early. The band just wasn't that intriguing. I knew I'd rather be home writing & petting Ivan instead of yelling in ears over the din. How many times had I stood fidgeting on similar evenings? How many hours given irretrievably? Too many.

Thus I left. Easy as saying yes or no, stay or go. I abandoned obligation, niceties & structure the way I left meat, military obligation & jobs as a teen. Soon enough I started leaving all the time- art openings, dull movies, dinners that ran too long with no sign of ending amicably... Sometimes saying goodbye, often just walking away. The joy perverse if alien, depending upon how much guilt I wanted to carry.

(cont.)

Personal relations, as you can imagine, were tougher to extract. Exiting could well cause the sort of complications I was hoping to avoid. Surely, I tell myself, other parties experience the same violent desires to leave, no questions asked. Explanations are due; but perhaps irrelevant at this point. Beginnings & endings; or accreted layers, tough as plaque? And just where will all this temporary exiting lead? Murkier waters, surely.

-travis fristoe. 10/04
providence, rhode island.



Of course there's some big papier mache blob scuttling down the street and howling, I thought to myself. I was too overstimulated and exhausted to do a double take or wonder what it was. Of course there's a giant log coming down the street. And Jessie's riding a goose.

There is a time during the days preceding Mardi Gras Day that the revelry reaches a fever pitch. Entire neighborhoods are barricaded for days on end by ponderous, garish parades on the main thoroughfares. There are costume parties and balls and raucous shows.

The Thoth parade is a giant parade that covers six miles and lasts for a good six hours or so. We danced with Panorama the entire way, from uptown to downtown, and then made our way for the Eris parade.

A clamorous procession in honor of the goddess of discord, organized by friends and just going for it in the streets. Led by a white owl (oft times regarded as a messenger of death), as well as a giant demon bunny, bike floats indescribable, a marching band, pennants, a giant teapot (the blob), and eyeballs bearing fortunes were the carnival throws. A dusting of flour, like the parades of old, and met with by friend and stranger alike. An ecstatic reckoning.

At some point I realized I had been parading for most of the past twelve hours. The next day I would find I had worn holes in the soles of my shoes. Things had reached a state of transcendent euphoria, and I didn't care the my foot seemed like it might be sprained from all the dancing. I wasn't on drugs, but it sure felt like it; my recollections from this night are particularly hallucinatory.

How do I explain it? We reach for something, an imaginative and expressive world that reveals itself at some moments. We can synthesize a nuanced understanding of the world's troubles, an acceptance of death, and a desire for communion in celebration with one another. Maxine Hong Kingston writes that "the way to the other place is wide open, and it has many, many mouths, consuming our things, and us, and issuing visions and thoughts." We can orient ourselves towards this, we can approach these thresholds and give ourselves over to what comes.

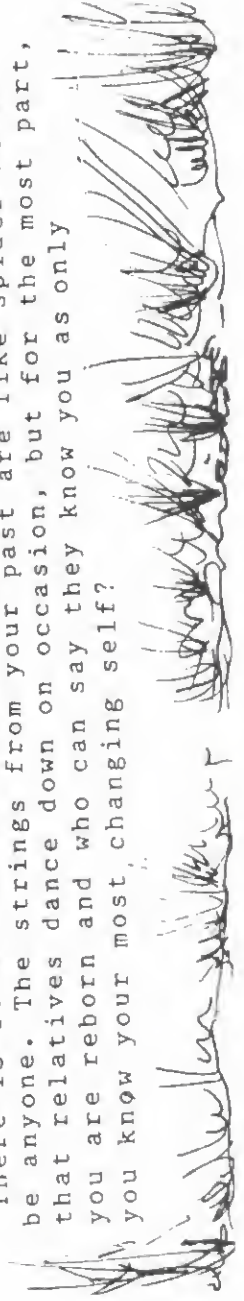
There's the beginning of leaving, that starts the day you think, "not for too much longer!", and every step seems new, every word seems to glow with a weight, working it's way up to a final conversation... followed by.... the beginning of living in a new place!



I have tried to describe it, but I think you may know of the mojo that works it's way into recently altered environments you call home; bridges are magic— looking down from them,

faces are invaluable—who will be your new most intimate comrade in adventure, drinking, dancing, conversating, or creating? High points— observing the lay of the land below. Low points—valleys I mean, engulfing you in the mystery of new terrain, and culture: urban wilderness unexplored, reaching up around you to hold you in the moment.

There is room for new daydreaming and possibility. You could be anyone. The strings from your past are like spider webs that relatives dance down on occasion, but for the most part, you are reborn and who can say they know you as only you know your most, changing self?





the beginning of night that comforts
sometimes fruitless day. or fruitless by the typical standered
maybe. There is the night creeping up and wrapping
a humid balnket of summer night around you.

the beginning of a garden, all paper and weeds and
soil, all bug bites and sore muscles at the first of it.
Getting blisters and glaring into the hot sun, while you're
hung over from the night before. siping coffee,
wishing there was more sugar in it.

the beginning of a long but exciting. bike ride
When pedals and gears attach to your heart and
the circulation of your blood.



transformation." She goes on to note that many of the authors in the book make
reference to this stream of thought, saying that "a 'metaphysics of interconnectedness'
or ... a 'physics of love' are symptoms of a political consciousness that is tied to the
spirit, as well as a methodology of love that is tied to human politics."

I shot up out of bed, out of a deep sleep, breath sucked in what just happened
something exploded holy fuck what blew up? I sat still and heart beating yet so still
and listened for sirens or screams or another explosion. An oil refinery nearby?
Someone bombed a hotel? I was terrified and alone in the house.

Finally I climbed out of bed, figuring I would call someone for reassurance, to
hear what they thought of it. Before I reached the phone, lightning illuminated the
sky. Rolling thunder, long and loud, and at the end of it that report, that explosion
sound. I'd never heard thunder like that before. That's what woke me up.

I lay in bed and thought of that being so many people's lives, the reality of
being awoken in the middle of the night by a bomb, or a soldier knocking at the door.
Lives lived in war.

A few days later I stopped what I was doing to watch a train crawl along the
waterfront, a train carrying all military vehicles. This is how war appears in my life,
as an infrequent part of the landscape moving along, moving away. No night-time
explosions. I don't even have to notice the train if I don't want to, and if I do notice
it's fleeting presence, I don't have to think about what it means. I'm certainly not
asked to notice or think.

When this war began, there was a big march, as in most cities. Somber and
quiet, the gravity of our anger and sadness. But here, if you're not having a good
time, I think people are suspect of what you're doing, no matter what it is. As Jake
put it, it's absurd that any public event of that size wouldn't have a band playing.

At a second line around that same time, the band was taking a break, but the
drummers were still holding a beat. People clapped, clinked bottles together, and
slapped street signs in time. A chant rose up.



Did you know that bees communicate by dancing? When one bee goes out and finds a food source, she comes back to the hive and starts an intricate dance. The speed of the dancing and the pattern she makes convey information. How close the food is, how good it is, how to get there. The position is triangulated, using as reference points the hive and the position of the sun. With a waggle of their butts, bees do trigonometry.

Hasidic rabbis of old danced in prayer. An ecstatic expression of their deeply contemplative tradition, legend has it that some rabbis would dance for days on end. There are churches in the world that are thousands of years old. Ornate and ancient, I've not seen them. I have seen trees in the northwest that are older still. I'm pretty sure there are still redwoods that are more than four thousand years old. A tree that began growing well before the bible was written. It's hard to actually understand this in a real way. But I know it as spiritual.

What I mean is, a sense of connectedness and wonder. Not necessarily an idea of soul, or what happens when we're dead. Some people refer to this feeling of connectedness as God, or Buddha, or divine spirit. We might also call it love.

Not long after the New Year, I saw Altercation at the Farmer's Market and we were talking about how it did feel like a real turning point this time around, not just another reason to freak out in the streets. "This year, I'm all about love. It's easy to love," she said with that euphoric smile, "it's hard to hate."

I think I know what she means by that. I will say, though, that many thinkers I've been reading lately, from bell hooks to Dostoyevsky to Thich Nhat Hanh, have all remarked upon the difficulty in loving truly and honestly. They point out that, while yes, it is enriching to love and damaging to hate, much of our world actually facilitates the ease of alienation and hatred, and makes difficult communication and love. We don't learn to communicate skillfully so as to love one another with grace. We don't learn to love ourselves, either, and this constitutes a fundamental obstacle to achieving any amount of peace or justice in the world.

In *All About Love*, bell hooks points out that the work of Erich Fromm, Thomas Merton, and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (and I would add Thich Nhat Hanh) all emphasize "love as an active force that should lead us into greater communion with the world. In their work, loving practice... is extolled as the primary way we end domination and oppression." This is an "important politicization of love," she says, that is often lacking in our thinking on either love or politics.

In the book *This Bridge We Call Home*, AnaLouise Keating builds on the idea of spiritual activism, offering that "spiritual activism begins with the personal yet moves outward, acknowledging our radical interconnectedness. This is spirituality for social change, spirituality that recognizes the many differences between us yet insists on our commonalities and uses these commonalities as catalysts for



the beginning of a silent evening. You are home alone there's the cat. There's the slow bike ride to the library.

there is a gentle puff cloud sky along the way, ceiling to your activities. There is the whoosh of aged paper from a million known and unknown authors. The beginning of sitting alone in a quite place.

The beginning of a habit, slow and patient—easy to slip into, full of promises and visions of who you may become, a ritual which repeats itself, establishing the ground of your day— who you are going to be.

♥ Abby Green



Handley

I don't like bars. But, I offered to cover a friend's shifts while he was in New York. I hadn't had a job. In a few weeks, and New Orleans is the only place I've lived where you can send your friends to work for you without much warning or explanation. Often, the employer is glad anybody showed up. I've sat at jobs for a few minutes before the cook realized I was the delivery person for the night. It is not a very complicated job and common in the French Quarter. I sit at a bench in a bar with a kitchen, wait for the phone to ring, wait for the food to be cooked, and packed, bike it to the address stapled to the bag, exchange the food for money, return to the bar. There are variations that include sidewalk, busy kitchens, multiple deliveries, but my job tonight involves a lot of waiting. I hate the bar. I've spent hours waiting there, unpaid, talking with my friend between deliveries. It is summer and business is slow. I read until I fall asleep on the bench, eat greasy food, and turn down offers for drinks from the bartenders. By the end of my shift, I want to swing something small and heavy against the heads of some of the people around me—the argumentative man who wants me to defend the book I am trying to read; the drunk boy who wants me to defend a house he sees as a lifestyle which is not my home anyway; the lonely new guy in town who is trying to make friends at a bar. Sometimes, there are hours between deliveries. I tell the cook I will be back soon, push through the bar without looking up, unlock my bike and ride.

Sometimes, riding through the city, I close my eyes. Not down hills—there are no hills in New Orleans—but in the middle of French Quarter tourist traffic, or along Elysian Fields speedy car traffic or when the sun is falling behind the hotels and the relentless air rests for a beautiful unexpected moment. This city is slow but summer carries a tension; hot streets with no trees for shade, never enough tourist money to share and everyone is ready to burst. The city exhales and I close my eyes to headlights, pedestrians, to everything but motion. One moment of peace, of focus, muscles release and I could almost fly.

It is dangerous in a small stupid way, like how I turned onto Decatur Street without slowing, moving as part of a steady flow of traffic that wasn't acknowledging me. Someone asked me the other night if I'm scared of cars and I bravely told her I've already been hit once; after that it isn't so scary. brave? bravado.

So a lot of the time, in the circles I find myself, when we say community we're talking about the mostly-white, punk-affiliated DIY community that has elected to share these values. What I mean is, we choose it; most of us weren't born into a neighborhood or family with DIY values.

And that's okay, if you say community bike shop or book store and you mean by the punks, for the punks. But for one, it's important to think about physical location and your effect on the neighborhood around you. And two, think about if you mean any broader community—if you mean to include or try to make welcome the neighborhood around you. Are you doing a community garden in a neighborhood where none of you live and aren't interacting with people who live there? Is the community bookstore open and welcoming to folks other than you and your friends?

These are difficult questions and we can't rely on easy answers. Trying to understand gentrification is tough, racism capitalism and gender terrorism are killing us. But we're trying.

Do what you do and bring it out into the world. Interact. Check out what other people are doing.

To share culture is to create community. Talk to your neighbors.

Neil built a little community center in the yard by Shelley's place, for yoga and meditation and meetings of the Louisiana Himalayan Society, a group of local supporters of Tibetan refugees. Actually, it's where a whole bunch of people live, not just Shelley, and share yard space and garden. The center is beautiful, Neil built it mostly by himself, from the ground up. Dug the trenches with a shovel, set the footings with cinderblocks.

Once the floor was done, he had a party. It was just the foundation and the floor and stairs leading up to it out in the yard. The idea was, before going any further with the building, better find out if the floor holds. What better way to find out than a big dance?

It was a crawfish boil, which is a big cookout where they set up tables made of plywood on sawhorses, to accommodate all the food. Mashed potatoes and salad and pasta and coolers full of beer. And then one entire table piled head high with just-boiled crawfish.

The big pile of crawfish can be a pretty overwhelming sight, as can the bathtub full of them scritch and scratch around before they're boiled alive. I've more than once heard folks voice repulsion at the idea of going to a crawfish boil. I myself am vegetarian, but I love a big get-together and crawfish boils are a beautiful cultural institution in southern Louisiana. I'd be missing out if I skipped them, at least the ones like this, held by my friends with a lot of vegetarian food and great music.

At the party this I overheard:

"A crawfish boil? But aren't most of these folks Buddhist? I thought Buddhists were supposed to be vegetarian?"

"Yeah, well, they're Cajun Buddhists."

The boys sometimes offer unsolicited coaching on ways I could act less effeminate. It's difficult for me, being immersed in their world of strict gender performance. It's a place that was distinctly uncomfortable for me at that age, and still is. Comments always come up about my pink belt, earrings, weird haircut. It's funny that the last time I got a haircut, I was worried about what thirteen year olds were going to think of it.

But we had a good talk about the importance of being sure in your sense of self, even able to laugh at yourself. I said that I'd rather bring all of who I am to any interaction, as freaky and funny as that may be, in a way to let other people know that I'll accept them for who they are and we can be honest with one another.

Sometimes this gets tricky. Kids often ask, "Mr. John, are you gay?" I could see the value in saying yes, although that's not entirely accurate. I certainly couldn't say no, if only based on the same reasoning.

"Well," I once replied, "there is a whole range of ways that people can express who they are and express their love for one another, and sometimes things don't fit into easy categories..." I trailed off, realizing I might be wading into difficult territory.

It was quiet for a moment.

"So, you're gay."

It can be difficult, and when I find myself acting out behaviors that were once so damaging to me, I feel like a jerk. I sometimes feel very discouraged.

Nonetheless, the school is important to me as an example of grassroots action and commitment. Working there helps me put down roots in this community. Through the school, I have gotten to know kids and their families from neighborhoods all over the city. I have come to know progressive educators and artists, as well as bicycle advocates. I have even participated in an African dance performance.

I say frequently that through the school, as well as Plan B, I feel connected to the community here. It's an overused word, "community." It loses it's meaning through overuse and lack of definition. People don't seem to know what they really mean by it a lot of the time.

What I mean is that I'm meeting more and more folks with shared values, and the more you recognize shared values or goals, and how you might work together towards them despite other differences, the more that alliances and affinity tighten the bonds of community.

I'm also meeting more and more people in the neighborhoods I spend time in. I recently moved out of the home I'd lived in for three years, that friends have been living in for five years. Plan B has been in the spot we're in for over four years.

I avoid certain streets, accident sites, superstitiously. But I haven't worn my helmet in weeks. A blinking back light seems to be a beacon for drunk drivers, but is that really my excuse for not wearing one? It is reckless and simple and stupid and I do not justify any of it. Of course I'm scared. But I've been pedalling faster from the start like preparing for take-off. Just to feel my muscles push, the bike forced forward faster faster.

I've fallen in love like this, not looking, not ready, we'll say bad timing and dangerous, beyond ~~logical~~ reasoning.

Because there are moments when the light turns golden in the city and I have to close my eyes to breathe; there are moments with his hand in a fist like a heart on my chest and it is almost too much, the threshold between flooding and drowning.

I return to the bar, sit on a stool, write another letter and pretend I'm not thinking about him. But everyone here knows him.

How do I tell them it is like swimming in the middle of the ocean? Like closing your eyes to traffic? How do I explain that I haven't been able to eat right in months, that coffee pushes me into an uncontrollable hyperdrive, that I get sick-drunk sipping whiskey? That everything has become sharp, too loud, too bright. I am photo-sensitive. I spend eight hours in a bar trying to write one coherent thought, trying to loop one string through a whirlwind of emotion and closing my eyes is the only rest.

I ride my bike to the bar or house I am delivering to, with my eyes closed half the time, always thinking of someone to talk to, writing postcard stories I'll never send while my friends are back at the bar, drinking and pairing up. At three a.m., I count my tips, go to the all-night coffee shop to read the news and have a cup of tea, then go home. There is a full moon this weekend. I want to reach towards it, I want to hold something huge and beautiful. I want to scream. I don't want to hurt anyone out of violence but for the need to finally break. I want to ride away pushing the pedals hard enough, calves working with air and wind resistance and gravity until I am going up up up.



-HOPE!

Day of the Dead

IT CAME CLATTERING AND HAULING LIKE SOME RUINED CARNIVAL, A NIGHTMARISH VISION OF ELEGANT GHASTS BEDECKED IN MARVELAS, TATTERS, LAUGHING BEDAMNED, AS THEY PURPORTED TO BE, A SHAMBLING CELEBRATION OF THE DEAD. WITH DRUMS AND BELLS, A FINGER CYMBALS, CHAINS CLANKING AND SOME SHRIeking AND BELLs AND DAGING SMALL SKELETONS ALONG THE GRAND OR PLAYED AND SOME NECROTIC CASTANETS. THEIR HAIR IN TANGLES AND KNOTS AND TIED WITH RIBBONS AND FLOWERS. DEATH HILARIOUS, LIFE DEURIOUS. EVEN THEIR BICYCLES WERE DISTORTED AND MISSHAPEN, A GREAT CONCOURSE OF PHANTASMAGORIC SHADAWS CIRCUING IN INTERSECTIONS, STOPPING TRAFFIC. WINE AND RUN PAIRED TO A THIRSTY GRUND IN OFFERING, A WEEPING AND WAILING WAS MET BY THE RUSHING PAST OF SPIRITS AND SOULS ALONG THE RIVER AS A GILDED ALTAR WAS SENT FORTH AFAME WITH REMEMBRANCE.



Oh yeah, that's what I do for money, for most of the year - I work at a middle school teaching a bicycle repair and safety class.

New Orleans Charter Middle School began as the daydream of a handful of progressive educators, came into life as a scrappy little school with four teachers and two parents volunteering to do secretarial work, and is now an open admissions public school that gets hundreds more applications than it can accommodate. There are no requirements to get in, and a simple lottery decides who fills the 150 openings in the 6th grade class every year. The only admissions stipulation, as written in the charter, is that 85% of the students must be eligible for reduced or free lunch, which is determined by household income - poverty level or below. As a Charter school, they have more leniency than schools controlled directly by the school board, and so they can develop a much more progressive and experimental curriculum and school environment.

One aspect of this is the insistence on arts education as a necessary component of any schooling. There is an elective program for the two periods after lunch, and this includes the bicycle repair class that I help teach. Some of the other classes are African dance, African drumming, painting, mural making, dance theatre, drama, gardening, football, softball, and soccer (all for girls and boys), Mardi Gras Indians, making comics, and more.

The electives are important because they introduce the kids to a lot of people that they might not otherwise interact with (and us to them, as well), and also to many ideas and pursuits that they might not otherwise encounter. Jay, the recently departed co-director and one of the founders of the school, put it to me this way: "Typically in school, a kid can be successful in academics, or sports, or socially. With the electives, it gives them a chance to find something else that they may excel at."

Often I feel that what I do at the school isn't really about technical bike knowledge at all. I'm not really interested in teaching technical knowledge to only the kids who are quick to understand things the way that I do, which is usually how it ends up happening. That's the whole problem with schooling in general, is that the kids who are apt and able get all the recognition and attention, and if your way of learning doesn't match up, or your interests and experiences aren't reflected in the discourse, you get left behind.

I want the range of experience and understanding in the class to be broad enough to engage everyone, not only the ones who get it right off the bat and who probably would figure this stuff out sooner or later, with my help or not. So I try to focus on encouraging a confidence in using tools; a lot of these kids haven't ever handled a wrench before. Basic tool use and basic mechanical understanding, and problem solving. From there anyone can learn everything there is to know about bike mechanics. About anything, really.

... is creating our own culture, continuously. It's rough-edged and often times misspelled, yet nonetheless articulate and passionate and thoughtful. We refuse to passively consume. This is a very important distinction. I don't know what combination of coincidences and confluences it is that brings certain people to the idea that they can live life differently, but I feel fortunate to be one of those people.

This is important - that we are creating a culture of sharing, of openness, trying to maintain places that people can be that are contrary to the usual bullshit.

Our gender expression is very much outside of most people's understanding. The way we live our lives altogether can be, with our emphasis on sharing, creating, careful critique, abandonment of the usual themes of obedience and consumption. But it's our gender especially, a bunch of people that aren't easily categorized, that actively blur and defy limitations. Either through a specific intent to do so, or through a refusal to camouflage the things that confuse people. It can be as simple as a shaved head, or whether or not you shave your armpits.

In *Black Butterflies*, Okra writes about the areas one inhabits and traverses when riding freight trains. The stretches of track, the trainyards themselves and the surrounding junkyards, abandoned lots, and weed-filled spaces. "These places combined form an enormous unrestricted zone, though the signs on the fences say otherwise." He describes how they "form a barrier to another world. In this other world, the keys to survival are self reliance, intuition, patience, courage, stealth, endurance, improvisation and play; unlike in the cities where obedience, order, punctuality, subservience, and the general acceptance of all forms of authoritarianism and drudgery and slavery, mindless toil, meaningless consumerism, racism, sexism, and the empty, banal passing of time are the norm."

Dominant culture, the square world, is the city in this metaphor; we are living in the weed-strewn lots and abandoned train cars, either by choice or because that is where we are placed, as outsiders to the strictures of gender and class norms.

It can be difficult trying to bring our values into the rest of the world. Both at Plan B and at the middle school where I work, doing bike repair and maintenance with people age 9 through 15, it often feels frustrating. It can be exasperating to be in this vacuum, trying to have everything work around concepts of self-responsibility and sharing and being accountable for your actions, even when those actions aren't responded to with a series of rewards and punishments. These ideas are antithetical to the way the rest of the world works. The kids find out that they can steal from us without any "real" repercussions, or that they aren't getting a "reward" for what we are asking them to do.

Still, it is important. It is especially important, in the work we do at Plan B with the Earn-A-Bike program, to be creating somewhere other than school as a place of learning. Let's face it - schools mostly aren't a place where you learn that much. But hopefully we're showing that anyplace can be, really, and that a few people with a bunch of tools and bike parts can also share knowledge and skills.

When I was a kid, I would lie in bed and wonder what death would be like. Being raised with no religion, I had no concept of an afterlife. I imagined my mental faculties intact, but with no physical sensation. I rationalized that in that state I would surely go insane, and I could only hope for a benign insanity. I even figured that's what people had mythologized into heaven and hell - if you went crazy in a good way, you would be in heaven. If you went crazy in some tortured, awful way, that was obviously hell. I would lie in bed and get a stomach ache. I didn't want to die.

As much as our culture is obsessed with death, with more guns and bombs and cars and pavement and clearcuts and poison, we also refuse to acknowledge this. Western culture refuses to recognize death as a part of life (or, as Sarah points out, to admit that bombs and guns really do cause death). We hysterically deny it, doing whatever we can to prolong these lives of ours, with surgery and machinery and drugs. And yet with death all around us.

Death walks with us every step of our lives, and the hand that takes ours when the time comes is not the icy grip of some morbid thief, but a familiar advisor to usher us along an unknown path.

To live in fear of death is to die having feared life.

Yet I still don't want to die. Sometimes still when I think of it, I am gripped by a barely subdued panic. Who knows what will come after this life? I do know that I cannot live in fear. I like being me, but I doubt that will continue, in any recognizable way, once I'm dead. And so, I try to enjoy being alive as much as I can, while I can. That seems to be an important, albeit elusive, understanding.

We're all still so young. There's so much time to challenge ourselves, to feel difficult and afraid. We can't start building walls and bedding down just yet. There's so much potential, so much to learn.

"There are only so many hours in a day," a friend says. So many hours! So many days!

I used to get upset. How could I not recognize my own potential, the potential of others, the mighty US that could be; how could I recognize that and not yearn for it, not feel disappointed when others seem content to be, well, just content. Coffeshops and boardgames.

I know it takes a lot to feel just plain content and satisfied and safe sometimes. There's so much ugliness and brutality around us. Sometimes the world offers little comfort.

But for the most part I think this: I'm not being bombed, and most likely will not be tomorrow or the day after that. I've not been raped or tortured or even truly

hungry. What's more, people who have been keep on; they fight, love, and try to create a better world as well as doing the hard work it can be to just feel comfortable in their own skin.

Two attitudes seem to be at work around me a lot of the time. A sense of entitlement, and a sense of obligation. Yes, we should feel entitled to what the world has to offer. This should also be tempered by a recognition of what is allowed to us, and why. As well as who might be able to indulge themselves, who might not, and why not. Does skin color, economic status, language, or gender abbreviate some people's ability to create space for themselves? To feel comfortable in this world, to be allowed to feel entitled to what the world has to offer? And if so, exactly what and how much should I feel entitled to?

And so, a sense of obligation. I feel that I'm failing my potential, and the potential of those around me, if I'm not responding to this sense of obligation to be sensitive to these things. I'm alive today. I'm not suffering atrocities; many are.

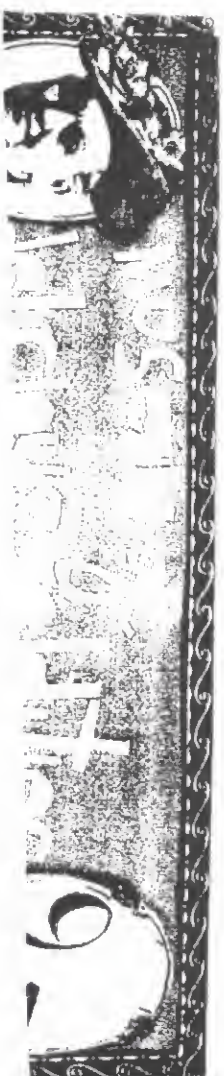
In an article about visiting the last leper colony in the continental United States (just up the river from New Orleans!), Barry Hannah writes of his reaction to seeing the joy exhibited by the residents, when he had expected to find a place of misery.

"Eventually I have come to understand that it is not the afflicted who are strange but this pampered yours truly and most of us, plump and bitchy and jaded. I was put in mind of Paul West's 'Rat Man of Paris,' who saw his parents burned out and slaughtered by the Nazis, of whom West writes:

What astounds him about people is the way they go about their daily chores quite unsurprised at being alive, or at least by remaining for so long in a state very different from the dead. He expects them to stand or sit aghast on the boulevards, stunned by the sheer joy of it, by the wash of gladness numbing them. Unable to speak or gesture but thrilled to bits because they can say to themselves: This is it. This is mine, so far. We are all of us alive without having done anything to bring our lives into being."

How many humans have lived on this planet? How many have lived and died before us, and for what? The idea of a linear historical progress seems quite faulty: nonetheless, we are a part of some stream, this collective breath and movement of humanity. Who better to be a cumulative point of it than yourself? The many small whitecaps on a river are multiple cumulations, ever-changing. So are we.

As Erin said, the need to live with an "abundance of joy." It's easy to mire ourselves in any number of things - fear of death, the world is a shitty place, critical thought. But then we're not doing anyone any good. There are moments when our critical eye, our vision of a different world, and our joy all coalesce. Those moments are what we strive for. To make that how we live.



Our drag shows don't often have acts that are what one typically associates with "drag." There aren't really kings and queens, well, there are, but there are also monsters and animals and plants. And a queen might be a woman in the first place. The thing is, it doesn't matter. If we're expanding gender, it makes sense that we're not holding to binaries to begin with. Sure, a man dressing as a woman is still transgressive in our culture. That's just not so much what goes on at our shows.

This last show was Armmi's inspiration. It was billed as a Museum of Draglicious Oddities. It took place at the Country Club, this gorgeous old house that has been converted to a gay bar with a clothing optional pool out back, and is also used as a performance space and art gallery. The show wasn't set up so that it was the usual back-to-back performances, one after the other, on a single stage where everyone sits and watches. We used five different rooms, and a lot of what was going on wasn't a "performance" so much as an "installation," or performative ambience.

Or just a big freaky, wonderful mess. You could get your nails and makeup done in the little poolroom that also became the backstage of a burlesque show, although no burlesque show was taking place. Or visit Michelle's psychotic gender confused nursery, or Cheech and Chong's chillout room which also housed the Glory Holes.

There was Salvador Dolly Parton's puppet salon, and an altar to Joan of Arc who was then paraded through the party before being ceremonially "burned" for transgressions against gender, in a spectacular fire show. Oh, and the synchronized swimming event, starring Shamu the love whale. And then there was singing and "alligator wrestling" and a draggy carnival sideshow. Even the dressing room door was open most of the time and people would wander past, peek in wondering, "and what's going on in here?"

GENDER DEFYING EXTRAVAGANZA 63410415A

"join the real world." As a white person, dominant culture continually holds the door open to me, beckoning, with forgiving smile and candy in hand. Come on back, you're always welcome.

Witness the gay mainstream, with their rainbow Budweiser logos and Republican voters and refusal to deal with much else, now that they've been thrown a few capitalist crumbs. Just white enough and just clean enough and just acquiescent enough about any real sense of social justice, and with money to spend. Safe enough to be accepted, as long as they keep quiet and worry about things like gaining access to more institutions, such as the military or the church. That's how it works - we get just enough crumbs to quiet us down, to keep us invested in preserving the status quo, as well as the unending propaganda that what is good for the ultra-rich is, also, somehow good for us.

Mayaba points out that in our culture, "white = consumer." And basically, when capitalism = democracy, then consumer = citizen.

So, it's a funny stick to measure myself by, but I probably don't have much to worry about. I've got a Koo Koo the Bird Girl haircut and no money, I ride a bicycle everywhere and have a penchant for drag, and I associate with people who have names like Altercation and Swamp Rat. I don't think dominant culture is going to be knocking down my door anytime soon.

Morning after the last drag show I sat on Ammi's dilapidated front porch, looking out at St. Claude Avenue and moving only to avoid the encroachment of the sun. The warbling of birds so very welcome, audible despite the din of traffic on the street. Chickens walking around, the buzzing of insects, and a trainyard three blocks away can also be heard, as well as the shouts and whispers of desire and disappointment all around.

Disappointment, unspoken desires, forgotten daydreams, wants unfulfilled and needs neglected. It's part of the background, as it were, the sounds you always hear but have stopped listening to. It's part of everyday.

But there is also resilience, a determination to make do and get through and live with it, if not to come out on top and dancing. There is secret joy and hidden beauty, the tiniest glimmers of imagination and possibility in everything. Chance encounters and bits of music.

Sometimes we pull back the layers of drudgery, the accretion of expectation and limited options, the abbreviation of our imagination. Sometimes we are able to dig through all that and carve out some space for ourselves, to open a window to the world of possibility and desire and limitlessness that is within all of us. We can make a place where we are our true selves, and we might meet one another that way, open and honest.

That is what the drag show felt like. For that time, in that place, we were all just us. We had slipped out of some of the limitations and boundaries and there we were, shining and glorious.

I was asked how I got into drag, and I couldn't really come up with an answer. I remember following my big sisters around, letting them comb my hair. And I remember sneaking into their room, to try on their jewelry. My mom's, too. I knew, even then, that I wasn't supposed to, although I'm sure it was also just the territorialism of five kids in a three bedroom house. I'd be dead if I was caught in their room, no matter the reason.

At age five or so, I found one white leather glove and I wore it constantly until it was stained a greasy grey-brown from finger to wrist. I would do dances in imitation of Michael Jackson and my father would ask me, "are you a fag?"

On halloween in junior high, I painted my face in black and white greasepaint and put on the weirdest outfit I could assemble. I think it involved a paisley vest, and I dimly remember a t-shirt with a peace sign drawn on it in marker. Walking down the hall, a popular kid that I'd never interacted with before looked at me with a smirk and said, "you freak", his voice thick with disdain.

Close to tears, I cut school and went home to scrub my face and remove from myself the costume that had felt so freeing to me just hours before. I am still often afraid of those moments. It's important to encounter and face that fear, to cut through the layers and see myself as I really am.

In high school I dressed theatrically, very goth-punk. I would wear makeup to go out, and began shaving my legs. This also seems like drag to me - just another costume I wore. We all wear costumes, all the time. It's cliché, but in a lot of ways when I dress up in 'drag', it can be a more true vision of myself than the one you'll usually encounter. That's the liberation of it.

at the "DRAG FROM BEYOND THE GRAVE" show on my

BIRTHDAY.
REALCUPCAKES with
BURNING CANDLES?



P.S. I DON'T ACTUALLY LOOK LIKE DAVID BOWIE

THE LEGS YOU SEE ARE
FALSE, THE ENTIRE CAKE IS A
DRESS AND I'M STANDING
INSIDE OF IT!

BROTHERCUT MADE IT,
THANKS B.C.!

Mostly, I don't consider what I do drag. It's just dressing up. More often than not, it involves dresses and makeup, but sometimes "male" clothing and no makeup. That's dressing up for me as well. That's also drag.

Gender is drag, and drag is identity.

Don't tell anyone, but growing up, I was a sissy, a nerd. I wore hand-me-down clothes, I cried in every sport I played, I couldn't change a flat tire on my bike, and I liked to dress up in my sister's clothing. I often was castigated by my dad, or treated with impatience and exasperation at not knowing how to do the simplest of mechanics. As I grew older, I cut away more and more of myself, as we all are asked to do in various ways. Stricter and stricter roles to play, ever more limited identities to inhabit. A dulling of our imaginative selves.

I hid parts of myself, until even I barely remembered or recognized them. My big sister, even more of a nerd than I was, became a freak, a punk, and when I was fifteen, she came out as a lesbian. This helped me immensely.

I came out a few years later, though still, for the most part, denied myself flamboyance and swish. I just didn't think it was part of me. Really, I had buried it so deep that I didn't know.

Approaching who we truly are can be scary. It can take our entire lives.

I've been referring to this past year as a second coming out for me. I used to grouse and grumble about having to try to come up with an outfit for a costume party. Now just try to stop me. Even very recently in my life, I was still hiding from myself these aspects of me. It was lifesaving for me to find the queerpunk scene, early on, and realize that other people felt the same as I did. Their queerness not recognized as vital amongst the punks, and punk not understood as a viable cultural identity in most queer scenes. I've stayed mostly with the punks, as that's where more of my sensibilities are shared and expressed in terms of DIY culture and lifestyle. But it's also because I think I was terrified to find my true self amongst the queers.

Internalized homophobia cuts to the very core, as does any internalized oppression, and we may not see it for what it is for a very, very long time. Some probably never do.

And again, recognizing your truest desires, the possibility of realizing them in the actual world, if only fleetingly, is somehow also terrifying. This is especially so when it is something that is not culturally sanctioned, not allowed. But any real expression of self seems not allowed - we're given such limited roles to play, and every time you struggle against that, or just never fit in, it makes people nervous. And that's scary.

Out of the muck of childhood memories, I recall having the desire to cut off my penis. I can't remember why; if it was just a whim, a fascination with altering my body in what I knew would be a painful way, like when I would stare at the tendon

that connects my thumb to my wrist and wonder just how bad it would be if I cut that with a pair of wire cutters. Or if something had happened that made me feel that my penis was bad, or was a wrong part of my body that needed to be removed. I also can't remember when this occurred; it could have been at age six, but also could have been age twelve.

MEMORY

Memory is tricky like that. I've asked my older sister about things that I was sure had happened, and that she would have been present to witness. She swears that those things did not take place. Any two people might remember the same event in sometimes glaringly different ways. Add to that excitement, or trauma, or anything else that alters our perception as it happens. And then add five more people, or ten, or twenty. No one will have an account that corresponds perfectly with anyone else. When my friend Andrew's face was slashed, his account of the event differed greatly from that of the corner store clerk who witnessed it.

Dreams, stories, things that happened and some that didn't, all collide and collude in my memory. Not to mention that which I forget. This makes me wonder about our ideas of "history." Things get so twisted as it is, stories get changed for personal or political gain. And so what if remembrance is just fuzzy and mysterious to begin with? Who's to say who is "correct?" Why do we rule so much out, try to quantify our reckoning of this world with precise lines and exactitude?

I've got a funny preoccupation sometimes with not being eccentric enough. For one because I love wingnuts and it's one of the things I myself aspire to. But also this: I've long worried about the sometimes imperceptible and gradual slide to square-don. The little compromises made every day, the bits of our values and ideals that we shave away, justify that uncomfortable feeling in our stomachs as we do it, for a bit of so-called security or acceptance. It's a valid worry, for sure. I've seen enough friends and acquaintances rationalize any number of things that would have been unacceptable to them a year or two before. It often still leaves a bad taste in my mouth, although it is understandable and I'd rather not judge them for it.

We start to worry about who will take care of us, how we'll deal with the big problems that seem to be more inevitable as time goes on. Etta and I talked about this, and she asks, are we building a community that's truly going to support us? Having benefit shows to raise money for medical bills is great, but at some point that's not enough. I don't know anyone my age who has cancer yet, but I will soon, I'm sure.

Creating anything meaningful and lasting can sometimes feel like too much of a challenge, or not really an option at all. The push to assimilate is unrelenting, and hard to resist especially for those of us so easily accepted into the fold, if only we downplay one difference or another, or simply give up on our "youthful idealism" and